

*Below Diorite Waters, Reflections*

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When I was young, my father and stepmother would take my siblings and me to Devil's Den in Arkansas. I remember so vividly at this time going into the famous cave there of the same name. The excitement I felt inside on the mornings we would go was unbearable, waking up as a 5-year old and smiling first thing upon opening my eyes. We would pack lunches and those giant handheld yellow flashlights. The cave was pretty simple from what I remember—maybe one would spend 20 minutes at the most inside. But it was so riveting for my little being going deep in, looking at the bats on the ceiling and on the walls, reaching the point at the end where a massive pile of rocks stood in our way (only for the older kids to go over). At this point, we would turn off the lights and feel the absolute darkness. It was so beautiful and horrifying... but powerful to me in a way I couldn't imagine. Perhaps this was among my earliest glimpses of a spiritual experience—something I couldn't explain, but felt deeper than anything else.

When my father and stepmother moved away, the trips to Devil's Den came to an end, and within that time White Nose Syndrome, a disease that has (and continues to) kill millions of bats across the U.S., came into the spotlight. By the time I reached my late adolescence, all the caves at Devil's Den had been closed to protect the bats. My connection with the caves in Arkansas grew limited to my own nostalgia and imagination. Just a few years ago, I had found a few caves to do recordings in that were still open. I recorded a piece, "Tourmaline Resonance", at dusk in a cave I found on a quick journey to Roaring Rivers State Park on the Arkansas-Missouri border. But often the caves I came across were small, hard to find or closed (and I didn't know about grottos at this point).

When I moved to Washington, I came across a PDF of famous caver Bill Halliday's book, *Caves of Washington*. I read it from cover-to-cover, fulfilling this deep desire inside that I had forgotten about. It occurred to me that I needed to do an important piece (or series of pieces) in these caves. I was at first attracted to the deepest caves I could find in the state, all of which lay atop Snoqualmie Peak in an area known as Cave Ridge. As appealing as this was, I discovered one needed fairly advanced rope skills to explore these vertical mysteries. I then began looking into the lava tubes in Southern Washington, mostly in Skamania County near Mt. St. Helens and Mt. Adams. I combed these caves, looking for the most ominous and deepest. I came across Falls Creek Cave, a relatively old and isolated lava tube in the middle of Gifford Pinchot National Forest. I read the description and was captivated: "...dark, brick-red lava flow...", a ceiling height of "50 feet or more". There was a photo in the book, one I probably stared at for half an hour. I felt it viscerally luring me in.

My trips to Falls Creek Cave were complicated, long, and beautiful. I had to tell myself this was a durational practice, a meditation, an experience that would connect me with something deeper than myself. I felt this deep loneliness at the time, a challenge to connect with others in the space of life I was experiencing. And Seattle can be cold—9-months of rain and gray, the same color as the concrete, the infamous social freeze—historic buildings are demolished and a new 16-unit apartment building that resembles all the others emerges in its place. But Seattle is kind of a perfect place to uncover one's own inner deep feeling. It reaches in to grab the soul somehow. The vivid trees and mounts, dense ferns, mist, and water bring life to a struggling spirit that wishes to connect with it.



*Image: Entrance to Falls Creek Cave, Joey Largent, 2020*

Trips to the cave varied from a responsible departure from the city at 6am, to leaving after 3pm some days, making the four and a half hour journey to the hole in the earth and setting up my camp with a headlamp to go into the cave after dusk, coming out around midnight or 1am, fasting most of the trip and leaving the next morning. Sometimes I would stay for days if I could, singing in the chambers, connecting with the space, eating lentils and raw carrots, watching the moss and listening to the creatures of the dawn and dusk; and then somehow finding myself in tears on the drive back, listening to Terry Riley or sharing the experience on the phone with my friend Deena, who listened so compassionately always.

Going into the cave took time, double the time it would normally take for someone hiking in and out. I logged nearly 30 hours of time in the cave for the entire project over the course of two years. The cave is known for having a considerable amount of breakdown (areas where the ceiling has collapsed in), and therefore requires one to climb over pile upon pile of thick basaltic lava chunks. This normally doesn't add too much time, but in such isolation, I had to move slowly to take care with the 70-pounds of metal discs and stands that tagged along in my old blue canvas bag, enthusiastically joining me in sing-alongs to The Supremes, Marvin Gaye, and Oscar Jenkins.

On my first trip to Falls Creek, I brought a Tibetan rag dung and a field recorder. I had this beautiful vision that I would blow into it and it would resonate deeply and create this powerful sound. When I reached the point inside the cave I had decided to record at, I set everything up and tried the horn— I didn't consider the change of temperature and humidity in the space, which made it incredibly hard to get a sound out of— not to mention the section of the cave I was in had almost no resonance. I realized I would need a new approach to capture the resonance of the space: earth discs to hum inside of a resonant organ of the landscape.

I selected standard drum cymbals for the work, as these instruments are filled with webs of overtones, yet we generally never hear these in their typical use, in contrast to gongs, which can easily display their colorful array of overtones for listeners in typical use. I placed microphones close to them in different locations. Through such a practice, one can experience both the natural eternal dripping of the cave, its resonance, and the constant fluctuations of each cymbal's anatomy as it pairs with new cymbals in dissonant and harmonic relationships. One can experience the qualities of electronics and reverberation without their external application. One can feel the organic shudders of sound.

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The idea behind the work takes into consideration two concepts previously introduced: La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's concept of Dream Houses: a space where an infinite composition can play for eternity, and musicians can play and work amongst such a sonic experience; and, roughly, the Catherine Christer Hennix / Henry Flynt short-lived genre (when referring to *The Electric Harpsichord*): Hallucinatory Ecstatic Sound Environment (HESE)—an interpretation of this undefined genre where the work of dense, layered, harmonic movements can bring one into an introspective, meditative, and, in some cases, a self-induced hallucinatory state (if listened to in the right settings at the right volume).

For the idea of a Dream House, I was not so interested in this as an urban/material concept, but as a naturalist concept. What does it look like to explore the most primordial form of space occupied by perpetual sound? Does such a space exist?

I remember reading a writing about *Dream Music* by La Monte in Aspen Magazine no. 9:

“...and in the life of the Tortoise the drone is the first sound. It lasts forever and cannot have begun but is taken up again from time to time until it lasts forever as continuous sound in Dream Houses where many musicians and students will live and execute a musical work. Dream Houses will allow music which, after a year, ten years, a hundred years or more of constant sound, would not only be a real living organism with a life and tradition all its own but one with a capacity to propel itself by its own momentum. This music may play without stopping for thousands of years...”<sup>1</sup>

The development of such a space, I thought, would be revolutionary. We need this. But the idea that these spaces are as old as the Tortoise, or older than the Tortoise, came to me in a series of dreams after visiting Falls Creek Cave for the first time. I realized that psychologically, the cave acts as a sort of sensory deprivation chamber— one is deprived of light, temperature change, sonic change; the constant dripping of the cave never ceases, acting as an organic drone... everything is consistent year-round, and has been so for thousands, sometime tens of thousands, of years. When La Monte conceptualized Dream Houses, perhaps he imagined the manifestations of his current Dream House in Tribeca scattered throughout urban areas— a space where long/infinite duration installations can be exhibited. We can foresee the invention of something that has yet to come as revolutionary, but as with science, we are constantly discovering and explaining that which is *already* with us. I think the Dream Houses so desired are already with us, yet we have to open ourselves to them; we have to *remember* them. The city, the technology, the culture is transient-- rent goes up, the space changes; funding pulls out, the space is lost; electricity goes out, the music stops. We can hold onto something for a hundred years, two hundred years, but what is time when we spend our years trying to outpace it? How can we connect with natural phenomena that teach us about the raw, unyielding truths of our mind? For me, I felt the urge to play alongside those sonic qualities that were older than our current cultural existence— that stretch into realms beyond our understanding. The idea of playing for an hour, two hours, three hours with something that has been playing for lifetimes is mind-bending enough. One enters the cave to have the mind exposed—face-to-face with their intimate fears, insecurities, passions. The cave remains consistent. Only the mind begins to see and hear things that aren’t really there, within minutes, hours, days.

While alone, the perpetual dripping in an ancient, unchanging environment is fully hypnotic in every sense, particularly in combination with music that enhances this, creating unyielding overtones and (in)harmonic relationships that constantly penetrate the scores of the mind. The body movements in such an environment become heavy and smooth as they fully absorb the quality of the manifested sound; the fingers and eyes encompassed by a web of glimmering mist; the breath becomes steady, yearning for the continuation of the weight of the walls that feed it.



For the idea of Hennix/Flynt's HESE, I had considered this idea for a while before discovering their concept, researching hypnosis (not as a means to control, but as a means to offer support or release) and trying to determine the method in which sound can act as a system that allows one to drift around in a different space for some time. The first time I felt this was very clear in 2015 when I first heard The Electric Harpsichord. It was prophetic to me; the feeling of being so overwhelmed by sound that I felt in some surreal state of ecstasy. And when I played the track for my raga teacher, Rose, she said, "oh, this is Todi, Raga Todi". She was totally right-- one of the fundamental afternoon ragas that yields such a mesmerizing state, especially in Pran Nath's 1986 recording on *Ragas of Morning and Night*. Both in the cave and on the way to it, I would either practice Todi or listen to Pran Nath's recording, in hopes that it would keep me in the right state of mind to produce something meaningful to myself and others. I remember having a conversation with my friend Tae early on while mixing the first track, *Below Diorite Waters*. I tried to explain that I was having trouble staying awake through the mixing process, that I would be listening to it at such a high volume that after 5 minutes or so, I would involuntarily pass out. Tae asked me why this was so. After giving it some thought, I explained to him that I think I had unintentionally created a situation where one could be hypnotized by sound (I would pass out, and then as soon as it was over, I would suddenly just come back awake, ready to keep working); the dripping would act as a primary consistent action, and the cymbals as a soothing, continuous motion, taking one into memory, overwhelm and the void simultaneously for sometime. Ideas that had been floating somehow manifested without my realizing it, and then became part of the very essence I sought to manifest.

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The album is dedicated to two percussionists who radically altered my direction in hearing and in music after seeing them perform separately in 2014. The first is Tatsuya Nakatani, who I feel blessed to have gotten to perform with, work with, study with, and spend time with on several occasions. Hearing Tatsuya talk about his life, his directions, and then hearing and feeling this real, overwhelming vibration from the times I played in his gong orchestra were unforgettable. Both times I played in Tatsuya's gong orchestra were in Arkansas during the late spring/early summer, during which heavy thunderstorms would come and go, or one could hear it rolling in the distance. The combination of such vibrations with the thunder permanently fused the two in my mind. Now, on the rare occasions of thunder in Washington, I can feel the vibrations of Earth and Mars quiver throughout my being. While inspired by such vibrations, I couldn't afford gongs, so I turned to cymbals instead. I wanted to have and give such an experience of feeling this vibration again— to create work that gives this and fuses it with nature. Tatsuya, while maybe he never knew this, was to me an important mentor. Though my own shyness made it difficult to pursue studying with him seriously, the kernels of information, technique, and theory that I got from him and his workshops formed the backbone of my ideology and approach to music. I still use everything I learned from him actively today.

It was Tatsuya's work that intersected with the second percussionist, Jon Mueller. I saw Jon perform in the same year as Tatsuya. He showed up and gave what I would regard as still one of the most powerful, intimate performances I've ever experienced. It was the instrumentation and structure of what can be found on his album, *A Magnetic Center*: a davul (double sided drum) and looped vocals. After hearing Jon's continuous, constant, and urgent pulsations of the beater, blending into short and dynamic structures of polyrhythmic cycles, I was inspired, multiple times, to explore this style of percussion myself. I recorded a few pieces that consisted of continuous percussion on common drum kit items (snare, floor tom, rack toms)— one, "Constellations", can be found on my now hard-to-find album *Dreams*, and the second on *Earth Drones*, "Realms of Memory and Voidness", which was three different drums with selected frequencies

removed. Jon's practice of continuous tapping haunted me since 2014, and even more so after diving deeper into his full discography. Each new release he put out uncovered this magical new sensorial world of texture and continuation, using different objects, or similar objects and approaching them viscerally. His work is both highly technical and filled with deep emotion. I think Jon's work has been the closest thing I've found that I really feel I can relate to in this way— not that our sounds are particularly similar, but that he combines this powerful music with an importance on continuity of both feeling *and* connection. That's powerful to experience. I think it can be rare to find these days in authenticity amidst the material world of music.

I began my approach of *Below Diorite Waters* with the intention of taking closely microphoned cymbals and treating them with continuous attention, moving forward with my ideas in spatial pulsations as can be heard in “Impermanence” on *Earth Drones* and my single “Arrival on the Bardo Plane”. I was curious to see the results, which brought to me a mesmerizing sonic bath. I took the idea and combined it with the caves, and at the time, felt them to be a sacred temple of sorts. In this coincidental turn of events, over the course of my time recording the album, Jon released two records of delicate gongs: *House Blessing* and *Canto*. I felt that both mirrored my experience of recording this album in a sense: I took them to be a sign that I was on the right path.

May this experience be a window to new ones, and may those who hear it find their own fusion with the compassionate, primordial, unforgiving nature that surrounds us.

— Joey

(November 25th, 2020)

<sup>1</sup> Young, La Monte. “Dream Music.” *Aspen Magazine*, No. 9, item 10, 1971.

